

Do You Mind?

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Summary: An important mission for the dragon-riders gets complicated when they are suddenly able to hear their dragons' thoughts, and vice-versa. The word "chaos" doesn't begin to describe what happens next. Rated T for some adult themes; the language is all K. Some Ruffcup, just because I never did any Ruffcup before, but it ends on a Hiccstrid note, so it's okay.

1. Chapter 1

****Do You Mind?**** Chapter 1

A/N _An important mission for the dragon-riders gets complicated when they are suddenly able to hear their dragons' thoughts, and vice-versa. The word "chaos" doesn't begin to describe what happens next. Rated T for adult themes; the language is all K. Some Ruffcup, just because I haven't done any Ruffcup yet._

I used text attributes to make the many kinds of mind communication clear. "_A human's thoughts look like this,_" while "***A dragon's thoughts look like this.**" In the quadruple case of Ruffnut and Tuffnut and Barf and Belch, the above text formats refer to Ruff and her head, Barf; "_Tuffnut's thoughts look like this_" and "***Belch's thoughts look like this.**" It'll make more sense when you read it in context.

This story was inspired by Anne McCaffrey's "Dragonriders of Pern" novels, which envision a world where dragons and their riders can communicate mentally. If you love dragons and haven't read the Pern novels, you should; but I think Ms. McCaffrey was an optimist when it came to how dragons and people might "talk" to each other.

****O****

"Here's the sword and the dagger, as promised." Hiccup had made sure to do excellent work on these blades when he made them, even though they were strictly decorative.

"And here's your case of Nadder Polish, as promised," Trader Johann nodded. He took the blades and gave Hiccup a wooden box. Hiccup lifted the lid.

"Six bottles. Good. It's always a pleasure doing business with you, Johann." Hiccup laboriously carried his box off Johann's ship and up to the village's ground level. These glass bottles of bluish liquid would make a Nadder's scales shine like a mirror, which would make the Nadders ecstatically happy. The Nadder riders who had to do all that polishing... not so much. But there were times when any dragon rider wanted his dragon to look his best, and some of those riders would willingly put in the effort on those special times. He knew of five Nadder riders in Berk who fell into that category, and Astrid was one of them.

Those riders met him in the training ring, braving the pouring rain to get their precious polish. Each had made a separate deal with Hiccup; Astrid, for example, had given him a silver necklace to provide the silver for the inlays on the sword and dagger he'd forged. "I never wear that girly stuff anyway," she'd commented, "and I know this polish is exactly what Stormfly wants." He passed out the five bottles, then took a look at the sixth one.

"Astrid, can I see your bottle?" he asked. He compared the two. "This one is a different color. I wonder if Johann gave me the wrong stuff by mistake?"

He looked at the bottle's label. "Psi Enhancer, Range Nominal? PERN, for short? What in the Nine Worlds does that mean?"

"If anyone would know, I bet Gothi would know," Fishlegs suggested. "Let's take it to her and find out."

"Here, let me see it," Snotlout demanded. He grabbed the bottle, but the rain made it slippery and it popped out of his hand, hit the stone floor of the ring, and shattered.

"That was brilliant," Snotlout!" Astrid raged. "I was going to save up to buy that last bottle! Now it's gone forever!"

"Hey, accidents happen," he shrugged as he walked away. "You should be like me â€" I ride a dragon that doesn't need to be polished!"

The clear liquid from the shattered bottle mixed with the rain water on the training-ring floor. All six of the riders managed to step in that particular puddle as they prepared for their morning flight, but none of them thought anything of it.

Hiccup watched the other riders prepare for take-off. He didn't love riding in the rain. His dragon was the fastest, which meant he got pelted with raindrops the hardest. If Astrid and Stormfly felt like racing, they'd go all-out, and he'd be totally soaked before they got home. "Couldn't a dragon take a one-day break from flying?" he wondered.

That would be like asking you to stop eating for a day.

Hiccup froze. "_Where did that thought come from?_"

From me, of course. But I did not invite you into my mind. Please get out.

Hiccup looked around frantically. He realized that Toothless was craning his neck to look back at him. He thought he knew all the faces a Night Fury could make, but this was a new one.

"Toothless, are you saying stuff in my mind?" he said out loud. He got no response.

"_Toothless, can you hear my thoughts?_"

Yes. Please stop intruding on *my**** thoughts. It's rude.***

All the other riders were saying something similar to no one in particular. Their dragons were staring at them with expressions of bafflement very much like Toothless' expression.

"Guys!" he shouted. "My dragon is talking to me in my head! There's something really strange going on here!"

"You're telling me?!" Ruffnut shouted. "My dragon just told me to quit blaming him when his other head messes up!"

"_My_ dragon just told _me_ to quit yanking on his horns so hard!" Tuff chimed in.

"_My_ dragon just told _me_ I don't feed him enough!" Snotlout added; he looked a bit pale.

"_My_ dragon just told _me_ that my outfit clashes with the color of her scales!" Astrid said with some irritation.

They all looked at Fishlegs.

"Meatlug says she loves me, but she wishes I'd stop kissing her in front of everybody," he said defensively. "She says it's embarrassing."

The riders quickly dismounted and formed a circle. Somehow, turning their backs on their dragons seemed like a good move. It made them feel more secure in the face of the unknown.

"What happened?" Tuff didn't like it when his world changed. He sounded almost scared.

"Guys, I don't know what happened," Hiccup began. "Somehow, our dragons can hear what we're thinking, and we can hear what they're thinking. I haven't heard any dragons except Toothless, so I guess it only works if you're touching your own dragon."

Astrid gazed at Stormfly for a moment. "She can't hear what I'm thinking. You're probably right."

"So what if he's right?" Tuff complained. "My dragon is talking to me

in my head! If I try to answer him, he corrects me â€" who knew Belch was a grammar Nazi? How are we supposed to live like this?"

"It's really strange," Hiccup nodded, "but it's not the end of the world, okay? Maybe it's even a good thing. We've always wondered how smart dragons are. Now we can find out."

"Yes," nodded Astrid, "but do we want the _dragons_ to find out how smart some of _us_ are?" She shot Snotlout a look.

"I think they already have a pretty good idea about that," Fishlegs said.

"Anyway," Hiccup went on, "I think they can hear us and understand us when we think at them, but not when we talk. So as long as we talk and don't think at them, nothing will be different."

"I can handle not thinking," Tuff nodded.

"Like Hiccup said, nothing will be different," his sister sneered.

"We don't know if this is a permanent change, or if it's something that's going to wear off," Hiccup continued. "If your dragon doesn't want your thoughts, respect him, just like if someone told you they didn't want to talk to you. Things are going to be a little weird around here for a while, but we should be used to that by now. Okay, let's try again on going for a ride. Nothing fancy â€" we'll just go all the way around Berk and land back here, okay? Let's do this."

As they rejoined their dragons, Hiccup paused for a moment to watch Astrid as she ran to Stormfly. She moved smoothly and gracefully, with no wasted motions, and was a pleasure to watch... especially from behind her.

"**Oh, for Tannin's sake, Hiccup, would you ****please**** quit filling my head with those distracting mental images? If you want to mate with the female that badly, just ****do**** it!**"

"_Just __do__ it? Do you think it's that simple, Toothless?_"

"**Of course it's that simple! You approach the female, you tell her she pleases you and you'd like to mate with her. If she's willing, it's your lucky day. If she isn't, go find another one who looks just like her. It's not like they're all unique.**"

"_Actually, they are, Toothless. And we __can't__ 'just do it' that way. Our parents have to arrange the match, we have to negotiate for the bride-price and the dowry and the morning-gift, we need a time of engagement, I have to build a house for us, we need a wedding with swords and rings and a sacrifice and â€"_"

Toothless snorted mentally. "**You humans make the simplest things so ****complicated****! All that nonsense over a simple biological function... I can't understand how there are so ****many**** of you. In any case, could you please stop thinking about it so much? It's very distracting.**"

"_Yeah, well, she distracts me too, bud. I can't help it. That's how it is, being a boy my age._"

***Then I hope you grow into a boy of some other age, and quickly. Every time you see that female, all you think about is mating and nesting. You always seemed so clever on the outside; I never imagined your thoughts would be so monotonous.**"

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Astrid bounded onto her dragon's back.

"_Let's go, Stormfly! Maybe today is the day we can fly faster than Hiccup and Toothless!_"

I bet I could fly faster if you would polish my scales for me. I'd look so pretty! Do you think I'm pretty, Astrid?

"_Of course I do, Stormfly! But you're a big dragon! Do you know how long it takes me to polish all your scales? We can do that only on special occasions._"

Hiccup thinks you're pretty. I think *he'd**** polish ****your**** scales, if you had any.**"

"_How do you know that?_"

***Every time he's behind you when you walk, his eyes get really big and he stares at you. He must really like your hair.**"

"_What? That __pig__! I'll __kill__ him!_"

I wish your eyes got that big when you looked at me. Do you really think I'm pretty?

"_Yes... yes, Stormfly, I think you're pretty. Your shade of blue is prettier than the blue of the bruises I'm going to raise on Hiccup's arms, and your fire is just a little hotter than my anger right now! Now let's go flying before I find out what Snotlout does when I walk!_"

Oh, him? He stares at you, too, and he makes this foolish expression, like â€"

"_Enough__, Stormfly! Just __fly__!_"

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Hookfang turned to look at Snotlout as the boy got seated on his dragon's neck.

***Snotlout, I'm glad we learned to understand each other. It's good for learning. I never knew humans were cannibals.**"

"_Cannibals? You mean... people eating people? We don't do that!_"

But I keep seeing your mind-pictures of you and that female with your mouths touching. Obviously, one of you is trying to consume the other. Why else would you do such a thing?

"_Uhhh... it's too complicated to explain. Can we just go

flying?_"

It must be very important, because you think about it so much. Please explain it to me?

"_All I can say is, it feels good._"

It does? That's hard to imagine. If dragons did that, it would be some kind of an attack. How many times have you done this?

"_Uhhh... never, if you __must__ know._"

Then how do you know it feels good?

"_Would you quit asking so many questions? You sound like Fishlegs!_"

One more insult like that, and I'll buck you off. I'm just curious, that's all.

"_Look, it's something that people don't talk about, okay?_"

But you spend a lot of time thinking about it. If I don't ask, I'll never â€" *Squirrel****!***

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"_Let's go, Meatlug! We aren't racing today, so we can take it easy._"

That's good, because I need to rest.

"_How can you need to rest when you've been asleep all night?_"

The night is for sleeping. The day is for resting. Everybody knows that. The Gronckle yawned hugely.

"_Well... maybe you can rest when we finish this flight, okay? Please, Meatlug? Be a good girl and fly for me?_"

That's another thing. Why did you used to think I was a boy? Surely you can tell the difference?

"_Actually, I can't, and don't call me Shirley. It's not so easy to tell with dragons._"

I can tell the difference just fine. Wouldn't it bother you if *I**** called ****you**** a girl... Shirley?***

"_Hey! That wasn't nice!_"

Then *you**** be nice to ****me****, and let me take a nap. Okay? We'll fly together later.***

"_Meatlug, we're supposed to fly now! You can rest later, and I'll... Meatlug?_" The dragon was snoring.

"Hiccup! We're having an energy shortage over here!"

****O****

"_Hey, Barf! Can you hear me?_" Ruff was grinning hugely.

*****Perfectly! You don't have to shout!*****

"_Awesome! I can talk to my dragon now! We can make crazy plans and no one else can hear us!_"

"_Hey, who is that?_"

"_Tuff? Is that you?_"

"_Who did you think it was? Gobber the Belch__?_"

*****Yeah? Did somebody want me****?*****

"_Who was that?_"

*****It's me, Belch! Somebody called me.*****

*****No, that was your rider being upid-stay. He wasn't calling you.*****

"_Hey, who are you calling upid-stay?_"

"_Wait... so me, my brother, and both our dragon heads can all hear each other at once?_"

*****Great, just great. Just when I'm finally working things out with my other head, now I've got two *_**more**_* heads I have to deal with!*****

*****Do what I do, Belch. Just ignore them.*****

*****You try ignoring them when they're yanking your horns off your head!*****

"_Well, how else am I supposed to get your attention?_"

"_Maybe this won't be as awesome as I thought._"

****O****

"Okay, whatever this is, I'm hoping it wears off, real soon," Hiccup said out loud. "_Real_ soon!"

2. Chapter 2

****Do You Mind?** Chapter 2**

It had been four days since dragons and riders first intruded on each other's thoughts. Hiccup had delayed their mission in hopes that the strange effect would wear off, but it hadn't. Quite the contrary – it was getting worse. They could share thoughts with their dragons without touching them now. The distance seemed to depend on the closeness of the dragon/rider relationship; Snotlout couldn't hear

Hookfang from more than three or four feet away, while Hiccup could "think at" Toothless from as far as forty feet away. The range seemed to be slowly increasing with the passage of time.

Toothless was the only dragon who was bothered by this; to him, it was a privacy issue. The other dragons seemed to enjoy communicating with their riders at last. The riders didn't enjoy it so much, because although their reptilian friends were intelligent enough to talk to, they tended to have one-track minds, and the conversations weren't too interesting. Stormfly was mostly interested in her own appearance and how others perceived her; Meatlug had twenty-eight different words for "sleep" or "nap" and used them frequently; Barf and Belch were primarily interested in playing one-upmanship games with each other; and Hookfang's main interest was whatever happened to be in front of his eyes at the time.

Hiccup had been able to learn a few facts from Toothless, on the infrequent occasions when the Night Fury was willing to exchange thoughts with him. He'd learned that the dragons couldn't hear one another's thoughts, but they could all communicate with each other with their roars and grunts. He'd learned that nothing like this had ever happened before, as far as the dragons knew. And he'd learned, via Toothless talking to the other dragons, that the other boys spent just as much time thinking about girls as he did, and that the girls weren't happy about it and were waiting for the opportune moment to do something about it.

But now it was time for them to take off on their fact-finding mission; it could not be delayed any longer. One of Berk's Gronckle riders had gotten caught in a storm a week ago and been blown over the mainland. He'd found a mist-filled valley in a mountain range, with small dragons flying overhead. If this was another dragons' nest, the members of the Dragon Training Academy needed to know about it.

They flew in their usual formation, with Toothless and Stormfly vying for the lead, Hookfang and Barf and Belch out to the sides, and Meatlug behind them and higher up. They expected to be away for days; they carried tents, sleeping rolls, and food behind them on their dragons. Just getting to the valley would take them four or five hours. This was a special trial for Meatlug, who tended to fall asleep if she wasn't mentally stimulated every minute or two. Falling asleep in the air, over craggy mountains, with a rider on her back, would not be good.

"**Are we there yet?**"

"_It won't be much longer, Meatlug._"

"**You said that an hour ago! I haven't had any rest since last night!**"

"_You had a good night's sleep, and you had a healthy breakfast. Now you need some exercise, or you'll lose your trim figure._"

"**Oh, the things I could say in response to that...**"

Hiccup glanced back over both shoulders to keep an eye on the other riders. Every now and then, one of them would take on a completely blank expression. That meant they were swapping thoughts with their

dragon. He probably made the same face when "thinking at" Toothless, but he didn't do it as much because Toothless didn't like it.

"**Astrid, why are you holding me back? Don't you want me to outfly Toothless any more?**"

"_If we're in front of them, that means Hiccup is staring at my... it's not happening, Stormfly!_"

"**I love it when you look at me and think I'm pretty. Why don't you like it when he thinks you're pretty?**"

"_I'm pretty sure that's not what he's thinking._"

"**Oh? You mean you can exchange thoughts with other humans, like you can with me?**"

"_No, and it's probably a good thing. I wish your fire didn't burn so clean; you could make a smoke screen, so we could get in front of Toothless, and Hiccup couldn't gawk at me._"

"**Then I'd get covered in soot! That would be bad.**"

They crossed a sawtooth ridge, and there before them was the misty valley. It was at least five miles long and nearly a mile wide. Those were estimates; they couldn't see the ground anywhere. The entire valley was cloaked in a thick layer of cloud; there were no visible features except a few rocky spires that rose above the fog. Everything was quiet and still below them.

"_Yeah! I got here before she did!_"

"_I really think I was an inch ahead of you._"

"**I really think it doesn't make any difference.**"

"**I'm with you. Especially because I got here before both of them.**"

"**My nose got into the valley half a second before yours did!**"

"**Did not!**"

"**Did too!**"

"**Did not!**"

"**Did too!**"

"_Is that what you and me sound like?_"

"_I hope not. It sure sounds childish._"

"**You guys stay out of this!**"

"**Actually, they started it.**"

"**You stay out of this, too!**"

"Okay, we're here," Snotlout shouted. "Now what do we do?"

"Look around for anything that might be a way down into that valley," Hiccup called back.

"Why don't we just go down and see what's there?" Ruff wanted to know.

"Because we could fly into a tree or a cliff or something," Astrid answered before Hiccup could reply. "It's not smart to charge in when we can't see where we're going."

"**She's a smart girl,**" Toothless decided.

"_I always thought so._"

"**Then why don't you listen to her all the time?**"

"_Well... I'm a guy, and most guys don't like it when girls tell us what to do._"

"**But you'd listen if a male gave you the exact same advice? You humans make no sense at all.**"

"Hiccup, look up there!" Fishlegs was pointing at the sky near the end of the valley. Some dark specks were flying in circles, slightly above their altitude.

"Good eyes, Legs! Those might be the dragons we came for," Hiccup called. "Everyone, form a tight group, and let's fly in that direction and see what we find. Be ready to move fast if they aren't friendly." They glided silently down the valley toward the flying specks at the far end.

"They look strange," noted Astrid as they got closer. "Their wings look like dragon wings, but their heads are long and thin, and their bodies are way too small."

"They do more soaring than flapping," Fishlegs observed. "I wonder what they're doing."

"Something about them makes me nervous," Ruff admitted.

"You mean afraid?" her brother leered.

"No, I mean nervous," she shot back.

"**You hear that, Barf? Your rider is afraid!**"

"**She really means nervous.**"

"_You stay out of this, hornhead._"

"**I'm kind of stuck in the middle of this â€" it's hard to stay out of it.**"

"**Besides, who are you calling hornhead? You've got twice as many horns as he does!**"

"_That's just my helmet, Sparkbreath!_"

"_Knock it off, all three of you!_"

"I had an idea," Snotlout announced. "Since they soar a lot, and they make people afraid, we should call them Terror-soars."

"We'll think about that," Hiccup said.

"I am _not_ afraid!" Ruff shouted.

"Look out!" Astrid cried. One of the flying creatures had suddenly rolled over and was diving straight at them, followed by the others.

"Evasive action!" Hiccup yelled.

"Hold on tight!" Fishlegs added. Five dragons took evasive action as they thought best, trying to avoid the diving flock of whatever-they-were.

Two creatures were going to pass close to Stormfly and Hookfang. Both dragons dodged, took their eyes off each other, and collided in mid-air with their necks crossed. Their riders were thrown from their perches by the force of the collision; Snotlout wound up hanging from Stormfly's neck by both hands and one leg, while Astrid was clinging to Hookfang's horns for dear life. The dragons, tangled together and unguided by their riders, spiraled downward into the white murk.

Four of the flying creatures converged on Meatlug. "Dodge 'em, girl!" was all Fishlegs had time to say before they were swooping past him. The Gronckle flew straight and level and watched as all four creatures missed her.

"**How was that?**" she asked mentally. She sounded pleased with herself.

"_It wasn't quite what I had in mind, but I won't argue with success._"

Three or four were diving straight at Barf and Belch. Zipplebacks aren't strong fliers, and they aren't the best at evasive action, either. The big dragon swerved left, then right, then did a right-hand snap roll. That pushed Tuff firmly into position on Belch... but Barf rolled right out from underneath Ruff. Her hands slipped off his horns and she fell, screaming.

"_Catch her, Toothless!_"

"**I'm on it.**"

As the Night Fury rolled into a dive, Hiccup was actually glad for the mental link. "Thinking" his order had been half a second faster than saying it, and Ruffnut needed that half a second. They plunged downward towards her tumbling form, flapping every few seconds to gain speed.

"_Can you get her before we reach the fog?_"

It's going to be close.

Hiccup held on tight, in case Toothless had to make some last-moment maneuvers. The dragon caught her awkwardly, her left arm with one forepaw and her right leg with the other. A half-moment later, they fell into the mist.

Toothless spread his wings to change their dive into a zoom climb; Hiccup adjusted his tail fin, and they began to level off. They had just begun to climb when the dragon's right wing crashed into something solid in the fog.

My wing! My wing!

They spun and tumbled out of control for a few seconds before Toothless was able to straighten them out. All their supplies flew off his back. Somehow he held onto Ruffnut.

"_Can you fly us out of here?_"

No, it hurts too much.

"_Then just try to land. Anywhere is fine; just get us safely on the ground._"

I can't see anything!

"_I trust your judgment, bud. Bring us in. Then I'll look at your wing._"

Okay, Hiccup. I don't think there's anything right beneath us, so... Going down!

Toothless went into a tight downward spiral, favoring his injured wing. It took about half a minute before he sensed land below him and eased up on his descent rate. Still, they hit the ground pretty hard.

Hiccup slid out of his saddle. Ruffnut picked herself up off the ground slowly. "That would have been a _lot_ more fun if I'd known I'd be alive at the end," she sighed.

All three of them looked upward. There was nothing to see but the murky whiteness.

Up on top of that murky whiteness, Fishlegs and Tuffnut suddenly found themselves alone.

"_Now_ what do we do?" Tuff demanded.

Fishlegs wished he had an answer, any answer at all.

3. Chapter 3

Do You Mind? Chapter 3

Hiccup looked around him. The air was moist, warm, and still. Huge, unfamiliar trees rose out of the ground and vanished into the fog; the ground was covered by ferns, horsetails, mosses, and other plants

he didn't recognize. A few large insects buzzed here and there. Ruff was looking all around in wonder. Neither of them had ever seen a place remotely like this before.

"The first thing I need to do is look at Toothless' wing," Hiccup announced.

"_Can you spread your wing for me, bud?_"

"**Be careful how you touch it!**"

"_I'll do that._"

Hiccup probed gently, using just his fingertips. He didn't bother asking "Does this hurt?" with each touch. He knew Toothless would let him know. There were a few places where it definitely hurt.

"I don't think it's broken," he said out loud for Ruff's benefit. "It's just a bone bruise." He said it again in his mind so Toothless could understand him.

"**If that's true, then I need to rest the wing for a day or two. Then I should be able to fly normally. I must have hit a tree.**" Hiccup passed that on to Ruffnut. She didn't reply; she just kept looking upward.

"Ruff, are you okay?"

"My brother is up there somewhere," she replied absently.

"The last time I saw him, he was firmly seated on your dragon. I'm sure he's fine."

Ruff suddenly grabbed his shirt with both hands. "Hiccup, you don't understand! We've been side by side since the day we were born! We do everything together! No matter what crazy stuff we try, we always come through okay, as long as we're together. We're like good-luck charms for each other.

"Now I'm lost down here, wherever 'here' is, and Tuff isn't here. I feel like I'm lost on the inside, too. I feel like..." She leaned close to him, as though she was afraid someone might overhear. "Don't you dare tell this to anyone, but I feel a little... scared."

"It's okay," he reassured her. "We're both unhurt, we've got Toothless, and we've been in worse situations than this."

"Yeah, right," she scoffed. "We've got a wounded dragon, we lost the rest of the group, we've got no food or water, we don't know where we are or how to get out again, and I've lost my twin brother! How much worse does it have to get before you start worrying?"

"I never said I wasn't worrying, Ruff! I'm just not going to panic until I have a good reason."

A moment later, an extraordinary-looking monster crawled out of the undergrowth and roared at them.

"Is that a good enough reason?" Ruff quavered.

"_Toothless! Plasma blast! Scare it away!_"

"**I don't shoot my relatives unless they deserve it. Do you?**"

The creature was like nothing Hiccup had ever seen or heard of. It was slightly shorter than Toothless and much bulkier. Its head was small and somewhat dragon-like. It walked on two short forelegs and two massive hind legs, and had four spikes on its tail. Rising from its back was a double row of vestigial wings, or sails, or ... Hiccup didn't know what to make of them. It roared at them again.

"_A relative? Toothless, can you tell me what it's saying?_"

"**Of course I can. It said, 'RAAAARH!' **"

"_You're a big help._"

"Is it going to eat us?" Ruff whispered.

"I don't think so," Hiccup answered as he stared at it. "Look at its teeth! They aren't sharp or pointy. I think it's a plant-eater. So why is it threatening us?"

"Maybe it has babies nearby," Ruff suggested.

"Of course! We're too close to its nest! That has to be it, Ruff! Let's all back away and see if that helps." Boy, girl, and dragon took a few steps backwards. The creature hissed at them. They backed off a few more steps, and it turned and stomped back into the brush.

Ruff let out a deep breath. "I don't like this place."

"_Toothless, you said that thing was a relative of dragons?_"

"**A distant relative. It can't fly.**"

"Toothless said that thing was a distant relative of dragons," Hiccup repeated for Ruff's benefit.

"Great! It just gets better! Now we're surrounded by dragons who don't like us!"

Hiccup grabbed her by the shoulders. "Ruffnut, get a hold of yourself! We train dragons, remember? If those... those land-dragons are anything like our dragons, then we can handle them!"

"Sure! Handle them!" she mocked. "So, how many fish have you got on you? Got any dragon-nip? Got any ideas for rubbing their chins when their chins are already rubbing on the ground? What's it going to take before you realize we could die here?_" She turned away, wringing her hands furiously.

"Oh, gods, I hate to do this," he said quietly. He made a fist and slammed it down on the top of her helmet with all his strength.

"All his strength" wasn't much, of course. It was enough to hurt his hand, and it was enough to startle Ruffnut. She turned back to him,

and saw him clutching his hand.

"You just hit me," she said, amazed.

"I know. I'm sorry," he winced. "I couldn't think of â€"

"That's exactly what Tuff would have done to snap me out of it," she said, with a touch of admiration.

"Well, I guessed right," he said as he slowly unclenched his throbbing fist. "But guessing isn't going to get us far. We need to get organized. We need, uhh, we need... why can't I think?"

"Water to drink?" she suggested.

"Yes! We need water! And food, and some kind of shelter, and food for Toothless. Man, I wish Legs and Astrid were here! I didn't realize how much I count on them to help me think."

"They aren't here," Ruff said quietly. "You've got nobody except one of the stupid twins."

"I never called you that!" Hiccup retorted.

"But I know you were thinking it, or you wouldn't be wishing for those other two to help you think!" she answered bitterly. "When you're in trouble, who do you want? Pretty, strong, brave Astrid! And Fishlegs, the walking book who knows everything! They solve the small problems for you, and then you put it all together and solve the big problem. Well, we've got a big problem now, and all the help you're going to get is ugly, skinny, stupid Ruffnut. One of a matched set of idiots, and now I'm even more useless because I can't find the other idiot!" She turned away again.

"Ruff... I'm sorry." He rested a hand on her shoulder; she ignored it. "I really am sorry, because you're right. I don't expect much from you, and that's wrong. You just proved it when you figured out that the land-dragon was protecting its nest. I'm going to need your help to get us out of here, because you really do have something to contribute. I don't think you're stupid."

"What about the skinny, ugly parts?" she murmured sadly.

"I don't think that, either. Ruff, I'll make you a deal. If I try to be lucky and be Tuffnut for you, will you help me think and be Fishlegs for me?"

She gazed at him in surprise for a moment, then spat in her hand and held it out. "Deal," she said. He stared at her hand with distaste, and reluctantly shook it.

"Okay, let's get started." He glanced at Toothless, whose ear flaps were pricked straight up.

"_Do you hear something, bud?_"

"**Flowing water. I'm very thirsty.**"

"_Lead the way. We all need water to drink._"

"Toothless says he hears water flowing. We'll follow him, and that will take care of our first need." The dragon set out through the thick undergrowth, trampling a path that Hiccup and Ruffnut had no trouble following. Hiccup hoped that the water in this strange place didn't have any strange properties. The _last_ thing they needed now was more surprises.

4. Chapter 4

****Do You Mind?**** Chapter 4

Hookfang and Stormfly landed hard, still entangled. If they had come down on land, they would have broken some bones, and their riders would also have been much worse for wear. But they landed in a shallow lake, and the worst effect of their landing was a double splash that soaked Astrid and Snotlout to the skin.

Each rider's first reaction was to check on their respective dragons.

"_Are you all right, Hookfang?_"

****Sure, Snotlout. I'm not hurt. That was almost fun, except for when the female was hanging on my horns. Hey, I get it â€" she's a horny female! Ha ha!****

"_I wish!_"

****Should I tell her dragon you think that way?**** The dragon made some rumbles and growls.

"_NO!_"

****Oh. Too late. Sorry.****

****O****

"_Stormfly, are you okay, girl?_"

****Yes, but I think my feet just got all muddy.****

"_Rinse them in the water while you walk to shore. You'll be fine._"

****What if the rest of me is muddy?****

"_We'll deal with that when we get to shore._"

****I couldn't stand to be muddy. What if a â€"*****

"_Stormfly, we have bigger problems than that! We're lost in a strange place, my sleeping gear is soaking wet, we're stuck here with â€"_"

****Oh, I see. You got a little water on your stuff, and that's a big problem? But if I get mud all over me, that's not a problem at all? I see, I see...****

"Stormfly, you do _not_ have mud all over you!" Astrid was so

flustered, she said that last part out loud instead of thinking it.

"Having a little trouble with our dragons, are we?" Snotlout chuckled. "You should have gone with a more _sensible_ kind of dragon!" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at Hookfang, unaware that his dragon was blowing bubbles with his nose underwater.

"I'll stick with the devil I know," she muttered as she coaxed Stormfly to shore.

"What are you doing?" he asked a few moments later.

"I'm spreading my stuff out in the sun to dry," she answered. "You should, too."

"What sun?" he demanded. "All I see is fog."

She fumed. She _hated_ it when he was right and she was wrong; fortunately, it didn't happen often. "Well, it has to be spread out to dry, no matter what. Our goal was to find a way into this valley, and we've done it, so we should stay here until the others join us. That might take a while, and I'm not sleeping in a wet bedroll."

Snotlout left his dragon and waded ashore to join her. "But how are they going to join us when they can't tell where we are?"

"Obviously, one of us needs to fly straight up through this murk until he comes out on top, and guide the others back down here. And judging by your sensible dragon, you're the best choice for the job." She pointed behind him; he looked to see Hookfang rolling on his back in the water.

"Hey, you overgrown gecko! That's _my_ stuff you're soaking!" He ran back into the water, tripped on a rock, and fell face-first into the lake. When he came up, he had a long piece of water weed hanging from one of his helmet horns, but he didn't notice it. He shouted at the dragon, which ignored him.

"_Hookfang, get out of the water!_"

"**You never let me have any fun!**"

"_You're ruining all the stuff that's on your back!_"

"**Why is it on my back and not on shore?**"

"_Because you didn't give me a chance to â€"_"

"**Oooh! Did you see that fish? Look, there's a whole school of them!**" The big dragon stuck his head under water, and Snotlout couldn't get through to him until he came up for air.

"_Hookfang, if you let me take that stuff off of you, you can splash around all you want!_"

"**Really? Deal!**" The Nightmare flapped up to get clear of the water, glided to the shore, and waited for Snotlout to flounder over

to him. It took a minute to untie the ropes, all the sopping-wet gear slid off, and the dragon was back in the water before Snotlout could say, "Go swimming."

"Now what?" he asked.

"Your food is soaked," Astrid noted. "We probably ought to eat some of it before it goes bad, or it'll be completely wasted."

"How can you think about food at a time like this?" he wondered.

"Well, it's a sensible thing to do," she retorted.

"Astrid, Astrid, Astrid," he chided her. "Here we are, stuck in this strange valley, just you and me, both of us together with no one else around, and all you can think about is food? What a waste of a romantic opportunity!"

"I'll waste you if you try anything," she growled.

"Oh, you're no fun," he scowled.

"So when were you planning to fly up and bring the others down here?" she demanded.

"No can do," he shrugged. "I just gave Hookfang permission to go swimming, and you don't want me to break my promise to him, do you?"

"You are impossible!" she snapped. "Unbelievable! Inconceivable! And a bunch of other big words you probably don't understand."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, but keep talking, pretty girl," he crooned, and made a kissy face at her. All he got was a mud ball in the kisser.

"Did I deserve that?" he sputtered, wiping mud out of his eyes.

"From what my dragon tells me, you deserve a lot more than that, but I'll be merciful... for now."

"Okay, Stormfly, now I know how you feel, because my hands are all muddy. Let me wash them off, and then we have some flying to do."
do."

"**Yes! Where are we going?**"

"Straight up. We need to find the others."
She rinsed her hands in the lake, climbed onto her dragon, and they spiraled upward in a tight chandelle. She loved the feeling of power and control when she and Stormfly performed precision maneuvers. None of the other dragons could do stuff like this! Except Toothless, of course, and some day she'd figure out how to outfly the Night Fury as well. But she'd have to find a way to do it without giving Hiccup a free show.

When they burst out of the top of the fog a minute later, there were no dragons in sight except Barf and Belch, and Barf's rider was missing. Tuffnut just looked at her and shrugged.

"Where are all the others?" she called.

"Hiccup went after Ruff when she fell off; they went down about the same time you two did," he shouted back. "Legs and I were trying to figure out what should happen next, but his dragon fell asleep and went straight in."

"Where did _they_ go in?"

Tuff looked around helplessly. "Everything looks the same around here," he said lamely.

Astrid threw up her hands in frustration. "Well, bring your dragon down with me. We'll get organized once we're on the ground."

Tuff nodded and gave Belch's horns a nudge. He turned; Barf kept flying straight. The two-headed dragon was jerking around in the sky, unable to settle on a course.

"_Belch, can you tell Barf we all have to go in the same direction?_"

"**Hey, Barf, he says we all have to â€œ**"

"**Yeah, I heard him. Where are we going?**"

"**I guess we're going down into the fog to find your rider.**"

"**Okay, you lead and I'll follow. Until I get my rider back, that is.**"

"_Hey, this mind stuff could come in handy!_"

"**Just remember, Tuffnut, we outnumber you. If we take a vote, you'll lose.**"

Tuffnut pushed on his head's horns again, and the other head came around smoothly to follow. They all followed Astrid and Stormfly down into the mist, and came out very near the spot where she'd landed the first time. Hookfang was splashing with his wings, hosing Snotlout from head to toe.

"Okay, okay, you can stay in the water a little longer!" he squawked. He glanced at Stormfly and the Zippleback. "Hey, where's everybody else?"

"About the time you two ran into each other, my sister fell off, and Toothless went down after her," Tuff explained. "They went into the fog and we haven't seen them since. Then Meatlug fell asleep in mid-air, and she went down some other place."

"So Fishlegs is all alone in this weird valley?" Lout thought out loud. "That probably isn't good."

"And Hiccup is alone in this valley _with Ruffnut?_" Astrid said. "That definitely isn't good."

"Hey, not a problem," Tuff said confidently. "She can take care of

herself."

"She's not the one I'm worried about," Astrid replied.

"Ooh, do I detect a little jealousy?" Snotlout leered. "Maybe lover-boy might get a little frisky with the other girl in town? Maybe him and her â€" He was cut off by another mud ball to the face.

"I hate you," Astrid snarled and walked away.

Tuff was unpacking his and his sister's gear from their dragon. Astrid spoke to him quietly. "You know Ruffnut better than anybody else. Do I have anything to worry about?"

"It's like I said â€" if he tries anything, she can take care of herself. He didn't even bring his helmet; she could take him out with one hand behind her back."

"That's not what I'm worried about," she answered. "What if... what if _she_ tried something on _him?_ Would she do that?"

Tuffnut thought hard. "I don't know. I was never any good at figuring out girls. She does what she pleases."

"_Then please, Ruff, leave my guy alone,_" she thought. It was more of a prayer than a request.

5. Chapter 5

Do You Mind? Chapter 5

Toothless led them straight to a small brook. They all drank deeply â€" something in the air made them very thirsty. Then they walked upstream, following the sound of a waterfall, until they came to a cliff, about sixty feet high. Their brook was tumbling off the top of the cliff into a shallow pool at the base. Behind the waterfall, Hiccup found a narrow cave.

"There's no sign of it being an animal den, so I think it's safe for us to use," he decided. "Now we've got water and shelter. We can live without food for a few days if we have to, but we still have a few hours to look for something to eat before we lose the sunlight."

"Should we split up?" Ruff asked.

"Absolutely not," Hiccup replied. "If the plant eaters around here are as big as that thing we saw, then the meat-eaters must be at least that big, maybe bigger. I think I'm right about us being able to train them, but I'm not ready to bet my life on it, or yours. All three of us need to stay together."

They wandered around the countryside, not wanting to get too far from their cave. They found a tree with some interesting-looking fruit, but Toothless took one sniff and made his I-don't-like-eels face.

"_No good?_"

That's disgusting!

Maybe it wasn't so bad for humans, but they decided not to take a chance on it. Nothing else they found even looked edible. They trudged back to the cave, discouraged and hungry.

The daylight began fading quickly. "Toothless, stay near the cave and keep us safe, okay?" Hiccup asked as they entered the cave for the night.

I'll do that. It's not like I can fly away.

"_I know. Thanks, bud._"

The cave was about five feet wide at the entrance, and got narrower as it went deeper. "You sleep down there, and I'll stay near the entrance so I can hear Toothless think at me if something happens," Hiccup suggested. She nodded and sat on the floor, leaning back against the cave wall.

The sun set quickly in this misty mountain valley, and once it had gone down, there was no light at all. _None_. Hiccup literally couldn't see his hand in front of his face. "I don't think I've ever seen anything as dark as this," he said.

"Does it scare you?" came Ruff's voice from the nearby blackness.

"No, it's just the dark," he replied. "It doesn't bother me. How about you?"

He heard her snort. "There's only one thing that scares me, and you'll never guess what it is."

"I've seen you and your brother in action," Hiccup said. "I'm surprised there's _anything_ that scares you."

"Like I said, nothing scares me as long as he's with me," she replied.

"So... that would mean that the one thing you're afraid of, would be... being alone?"

She inhaled sharply. "If you _ever_ breathe a _word_ about this to _anyone_ â€" "

"My lips are sealed!" he exclaimed. "As far as I'm concerned, you're afraid of nothing. Besides, that's not a fear that can affect you very often, right? You're always with your brother, and you're sure to get married some day soon â€" "

"Yeah, right," she scoffed.

"You don't think so? You're the right age, and the boys outnumber the girls in this town, so you have lots of prospects."

"Hiccup, look at me! Well, you can't look at me, it's too dark. But you know what I look like! I've got no face, I've got no figure, I've got no money... the only thing I've got is a twin brother who gives

the thumbs-down to every boy I've ever met! 'He's not good enough for you, Ruff.' 'You can do better than him, Ruff.' If he has his way, I'll die an old maid! Which is probably what's going to happen anyway." He thought he heard her snuffle.

He slid, a few inches at a time, toward her in the blackness, hoping that his outstretched hands would land on her shoulder or her arm and not on someplace embarrassing. He found one of her braids, which let him rest one hand on her shoulder. "Ruff... you don't know what the future holds! You've got a lot more going for you than you think!"

"Name something," she whispered.

"Okay, well... I've never seen you with your hair let down, but I bet it looks gorgeous. It's a nice shade of blonde, and you've got a lot of it, and it's very long."

"What's the big deal about that?"

"I guess you didn't get the memo," he said quietly. "Guys like long hair on girls. No one knows why; we just do."

After a few seconds, she said, "Name something else."

"I bet you've got a pretty smile, but you never use it," he thought out loud.

"Anything else?"

"You're honest," he said. "That can be hard to find, sometimes. You're also brave, and you're not afraid to be yourself."

"Do you mean that stuff?"

"Every word of it," he replied. "I wouldn't look you in the eyes and lie, even though I can't see your eyes."

He felt her rest her hand on his. "Thanks, Hiccup. You're special."

"I've been called worse," he shrugged. "Shall we try to get some sleep?"

"I guess," she answered. "There isn't much else we can do, right?" He slid away a few feet and stretched out on the floor.

After a few seconds, she said, "I'm cold."

"It doesn't feel cold to me," he answered. "Are you feeling okay?"

"We skinny people get cold easily," she said.

"It's too dark to find firewood," he answered. "We're just going to have to find some way to deal with it."

"Okay," she said. She suddenly snuggled up against him, with her arm around his waist.

"Ruff, are you _crazy?_ Astrid would kill the both of us if she saw this!"

"She's not here. And she couldn't see this even if she was standing right next to us â€" it's too dark." She sounded rather pleased with herself for thinking of that.

"This isn't right, Ruff. You and me... we..."

"Hiccup, you did something a couple of minutes ago that nobody has ever done before. You tried to make me feel good about myself. You said nice things about me, without wanting something from me in return." She put her lips right to his ear and whispered, "I like that." Her tongue flicked against his earlobe. She gave him goosebumps in spite of himself.

"_Toothless, I need your help! I need a distraction! Shoot a fireball next to the cave!_"

He sensed the dragon coming to full alertness. "***What's wrong?*"

"_I think she wants to mate with me!_"

"**Okay, that's the good news; what's the bad news?*"

"_I don't want to mate with her!_"

Toothless sent a mental picture of himself, hitting his head with his wing. It was a dragon facepalm. "***Hiccup, ****please**** tell me this is one of your jokes! For days, you've been harassing me with thoughts about your mating urges, and now that you've finally found a receptive female, suddenly you don't want it? What is ****wrong**** with you?*"

"_We aren't married! I don't even love her! It isn't right._"

"**Hiccup, mating isn't right nor wrong. It just ****is****. Go ahead and mate with her. You'll feel better in the morning.**"

"_But Astrid will kill me!_"

"**That's between you and Astrid. I'm staying out of your personal affairs.**" He sent a mental picture of himself curling up and going to sleep.

Meanwhile, Ruffnut was nuzzling his neck. "Admit it, Hiccup â€" doesn't that feel good? My dragon told me you guys always think about this stuff. Wouldn't you love to find out what it's like?"

He couldn't deny it felt good, but that didn't mean he was willing to receive it. "Ruff, you're not my girlfriend, or my wife, or anything! You shouldn't be doing this!"

"I'm never going to be anyone's wife," she whispered. "I'm resigned to that. All I can hope for is moments like this, with a really nice guy who cares how I feel. Here and now, you and me, is as good as it's ever going to get. Is it wrong for me to want to be close to someone when I can?"

He rolled over to face her. "I don't think it's right to â€" Her lips cut off whatever else he was going to say. She didn't kiss like Astrid did, but she still lit a fire in him. He pulled his face away, but he wasn't strong enough to escape from her arms, and he felt his resolve fading. She wanted what she wanted; he was trying to do the right thing; but his hormones had betrayed him and were fighting on her side. That made it an unfair contest.

"_Toothless, she's getting serious! I really need your help here!_"

"**I haven't found a female Night Fury in all my life. You've got a female who's throwing herself at you, and I'm supposed to feel sorry for you? Just mate with her and get it over with, and let me get some sleep!**"

"_Bud, there's no such thing as 'get it over with.' If I mate with her now, she'll probably want to do it again in the morning!_"

"**Again in the morning? Are you trying to tell me... that humans can mate more than once a year?**"

"_We aren't like dragons, bud. When we're young and strong, I've heard we can do it two or three times in a __day__._"

"**You mean, if I don't stop this, you're going to be bombarding me with these images again, and again, and...**"

Half a second later, there was a purple flash and a thunderous crash from right outside the cave. Ruff let go of him instantly. "What was that?"

"Toothless must have seen something," he answered as he stood. He bumped into her in the dark; she clung to his arm, but she seemed nervous now, not amorous.

"_Thanks, bud. That did the job._"

"**Is there any chance you'll go to sleep tonight?**"

"_I sure hope so._"

"**I hope so, too.**"

He patted Ruffnut on the shoulder. "It's okay. It was a false alarm."

"Oh." She relaxed somewhat. "So... can we pick up where we left off?"

"No, we can't do that," he said. "I'm going to sit down, and if you're still cold, you can sit next to me. I think we need to talk." He sat down and leaned back against the cave wall. After a few seconds, she sat down as well. She was right up against him, but she sat very stiffly.

"Ruff," he began, "you've got a lot more going for you than you realize. You've got more going for you than I ever thought. Your

future isn't nearly as bleak as you're imagining. I guess what I'm trying to say is, you don't have to throw yourself at me as if I was your only hope."

No answer.

"You're prettier than you realize, you're smarter than everybody else realizes... About the only thing that's really holding you back is that you don't have a life outside of your brother."

She sniffled. "I should have known you'd reject me, too," she finally whispered.

"Ruff â€" He felt for her shoulder, ran his finger down her arm until he found her hand in the dark, and held it. "If I wasn't already in love with somebody else, things could be different. I'm not rejecting you â€" it's nothing personal. It's just that... you're moving in on somebody who's already taken."

"She's not here," Ruff whispered hopefully. "It's just you and me. Nobody would ever know."

"I'd know," he answered. "Every time I looked at you, I'd be reminded of it. Every time I looked at Astrid, I'd be reminded of it. That's not the kind of thing I could just forget about."

"I'm not asking you to make a commitment to me or anything," she argued softly. "Just this one time, this one chance that will never come again."

"You're asking me for a one-night fling," he answered, trying not to sound harsh. "Would that really make you happy, or would it just make things worse in the long run?"

"Hiccup, you're not making any sense!" she burst out. "The only time a boy ever says nice things to me is when he wants me... or just certain parts of me. You're saying all the right things, you're making me feel beautiful, but you don't want anything from me! I don't get it."

"You already knew I wasn't like most guys," he said. "So stop expecting me to be just like them. I'll never fit that mold, even if I tried, and I've given up trying."

"Then what should I expect from you?" she wondered.

"The unexpected," he whispered. "But we ought to get some sleep if we can."

"I really am cold, a little," she murmured.

"If you promise to behave, I'll... we can keep each other warm," he said hesitantly.

"Deal," she said. He heard her spit, and she pressed her hand into his. He shook it reluctantly and lay down on his side. She curled up behind him and lightly wrapped one arm around his waist, but that was all. She was soon sound asleep. He had a much harder time drifting off.

6. Chapter 6

Do You Mind? Chapter 6

Fishlegs awoke slowly. Judging by how he was lying, he and Meatlug had been falling mostly down, with some forward motion, when they'd hit the cliff in the fog. Judging by the broken horns on his helmet, he'd hit the wall headfirst; his helmet had probably saved his life. He had some bruises on his arms and legs, and a sore neck, but seemed intact otherwise.

Meatlug was lying on her side, snoring lustily. The impact with the rock cliff apparently hadn't done her any harm; that was the good news. The bad news was that the cliff was carved out of the side of a thick rocky spire that disappeared out of sight into the mist, both upwards and downwards. They had about sixty square feet of rock; beyond that, they had to either fly or fall. Meatlug took up most of that space.

"Meatlug? Are you okay?" The sleeping dragon ignored him.

"_Meatlug? Are you okay?_" he thought.

It took her a few seconds to return to consciousness. "***What's wrong?*"

"_Well, we're stuck on this cliff, and the only way off of it is to fly._"

"**Oh. Good thing I can fly, then. I thought there was a problem.**" She began to drift off again.

"_Meatlug, we need to get off of here before we fall off by accident!_"

"**Fishlegs, my little pink friend, I'm not going anywhere, by accident or on purpose. So if you hold still too, we'll both be fine.**"

"_But... what if I fall asleep, and roll over, and fall off? Can't we get down on the ground now?_"

"**Don't you remember the Gronckles' First Law of Motion? 'A Gronckle at rest tends to remain at rest. A Gronckle in motion would rather be at rest.' I am resting. You don't want me to break the law, do you?*"

"_I think there's something in that law about 'unless acted on by an external force,' isn't there?_"

"**We Gronckles are great at ignoring external forces. Fishlegs, you really ought to take more naps. You'd be a lot more relaxed overall, you'll understand me better, and you'd be less stressed about little things like being stuck on a cliff a quarter mile above the ground. And since I'm not going anywhere for a while, and you can't go anywhere without me, you might as well take a nap. Trust me, you'll love it.**"

"_What if I get hungry? Which I am._"

A deep snore was all the answer he got.

All the gear on Meatlug's back had apparently broken loose and fallen off when she hit the cliff. The rocks weren't very comfortable to lie on. His tummy was rumbling, he didn't know where he was, there was no way for his friends to find him, and he couldn't do a thing about it.

He tried to think of something good about the position he was in.

"Dagur and Alvin aren't around" was the best he could come up with.

****O****

"Okay, we've got three dragons," Astrid began. "We probably have a couple of hours before the sun goes down. We need to search for the others."

"That's going to be hard," Snotlout said. "We can't get very high without going into the fog, and if we stay low, we can't see very far."

"That's true," she nodded. "We'll just do the best we can. We'll spread out, fly straight out from here for a while, turn left, and fly back. That will cover the most ground in the least amount of time."

"Should we split up in this strange place?" Tuffnut asked. "What if some more of those terror-soars dive on us? We could wind up downed and... alone."

"You almost sound scared of that, Tuffnut!" Snotlout taunted. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Never mind that," Astrid cut in. Something about Tuff's attitude when he talked about being alone... she'd sort out the details later. "We'll just form a line, go out, turn together, and come back here. We won't cover as much ground, but we'll be safe."

"Gobber said safety is overrated," Lout pointed out.

"That was just before the Boneknapper Dragon attacked us, and you'd have given your right arm for a little safety," Astrid shot back. "We stay together for now." They mounted up and sprang into the air.

"Spread out a little more," she shouted. Hookfang slid away easily; Barf and Belch took longer.

"It takes me a second to get the word to both heads," Tuff called.

They flew eastward just below the fog layer, which got them about a hundred and fifty feet above the ground. Many of the trees were taller than that, so they had to swerve from time to time. Those trees looked strange; they weren't the pines and other conifers that grew on Berk. The low-growing plants also looked different to

them.

"What... is that?" Snotlout suddenly shouted, and pointed to their right. "That" was almost as big as Hookfang and had a vaguely dragon-like appearance, including the nasty big pointy teeth, but it had no wings and walked on two legs. It glared at them and hissed, but they were far too high for it to reach.

Snotlout went a bit pale. "I am very glad that we're up here and that is down there."

"My sister is down there too," Tuff pointed out.

"So is Hiccup," Astrid worried.

"They've got Toothless. He can protect them, right?" Lout suggested.

"As long as Toothless is okay," Astrid said. "There may be something wrong with him. Otherwise, the three of them would have flown out of the fog by the time I went up to find Tuff."

"Did I mention, I wanted only good news?" Tuff quavered.

"I thought you said your sister could take care of herself!" Snotlout shouted.

"Hiccup, she can handle," Tuff called back. "That thing... not so much."

"Maybe we should have our dragons flame it and take it out," Snotlout suggested.

"What if it breathes fire and injures one of us?" Astrid asked. "No, let's leave it alone. Our best plan is to find our friends and get out of this place." They flew in silence, turned when she thought they'd gone far enough, and swept back until they found the lake again. They landed just as the sunlight was beginning to fade.

"My sleeping gear is still damp," she lamented.

"Mine is still soaked," Snotlout complained.

"Should I throw mine in the lake for a minute, just so I don't feel left out?" Tuff asked.

"Hey!" Astrid burst out. "Don't you have Ruff's sleeping gear, too?"

"Yeah, I think so," Tuff nodded.

"That's a little help," she decided. "Snotlout, you and Tuff can share his dry tent; I'll use hers. One of us can use her sleeping roll; there's no sense in both of us sleeping in damp stuff."

"Okay, who gets the dry stuff?" Snotlout asked. "Do we draw straws, or do we arm-wrestle for it?"

"You could be a gentleman and let the lady sleep on the dry stuff," she said with a hint of a smile.

"I'm a Viking; I don't know what a 'gentleman' is," he grinned.

"Oh, I forgot, you don't know any words of three syllables or more," she said, with the same partial grin. "I guess we'll draw straws, then." She found some dry grass and picked two pieces of differing lengths. She made sure the fatter of the two was also the shorter one. She held them out, and sure enough, Lout went for the bigger-looking one.

"I guess you lose," she said, trying not to look too triumphant. "Next time, unload your sensible dragon before he goes for a dip."

With their dragons on guard duty, they knew they were safe, but they still slept restlessly.

7. Chapter 7

Do You Mind? Chapter 7

When Hiccup finally awakened the next morning, he almost didn't recognize Ruffnut. He had never seen her with her hair unbound and unbraided before; she'd also taken off her helmet. She had a lot of hair, thick and full-bodied. It fell in glorious flax-colored waves down past her waist, and rippled and flowed as she moved. He couldn't help wondering what it would look like in bright sunlight. He caught himself wondering what it would feel like to run his fingers through it.

She saw him staring, and fiddled nervously with a few strands. "You like it?"

"The word 'awesome' is overused, but I think it applies here," he nodded. At her confused expression, he added, "It means 'yes, I like it'."

She shook her head and flipped the hair back over her shoulders with both hands. "It's not very practical to fight dragons this way, or spar with my brother. I almost never wear it loose. You might never see it like this again."

"I'll treasure the memory," he nodded.

"So... what do we do now?" she asked.

"We try to find something to eat, and also find something for Toothless to eat. That reminds me."

"_Toothless, how's the wing?_"

"**It's mending slowly. I think I'm going to stay grounded for the day. How was the mating?**"

"_There __was__ none, thanks to you. I owe you one._"

"**I still don't understand. She's changed her appearance just for you, so she's clearly drawn to you. You said she was willing; you make it sound like that's uncommon. This could be your chance of a

lifetime.**"

"_Bud... like you said, we humans have made this stuff very complicated. All I can tell you is, there are certain times and certain places and certain people it's right with, and it's wrong any other way. I think she's still trying to pull me in. I'm asking you __please__, don't you push me that way, too._"

"**I'd like to see you happy, and I'd like to see an end to the frustrated images you keep lobbing into my brain. Mating would make you happy and end the frustration. What's the worst that could happen?**"

"_She could get pregnant and her father would kill me, or Astrid could find out and __she'd__ beat me senseless, or her brother could find out and __he'd__ beat me senseless, or my dad could find out and I'd be disgraced before the whole village, or I could just feel guilty about it for the rest of my life because I'm supposed to save it for the girl I marry. Or all of the above._"

"**Huh... I guess that ****could**** pour cold water on your passions. I'll keep my common sense to myself, and let you play this strange game your way.**"

"_Thanks. I appreciate it. We're going to try and find you some fish; want to come along?_"

"**Freshwater fish would be a nice change. Lead the way, O frustrated non-mating human!**"

"_Toothless, please don't take that tone with me! We're stranded in a strange place, we don't have any food, I've got a predatory female after me... I don't need __this__!_"

"**You just gestured to all of me.**"

"Did Toothless have anything interesting to say?" Ruff wondered.

"His wing is feeling a little better, but he doesn't want to try flying today," Hiccup answered, trying to hide his startled look. "Let's walk downstream. Maybe we'll find a pool with some fish in it." She nodded and they followed the brook.

"Man, it's warm and humid in this place!" he exclaimed after a few minutes. "I might take my fur vest off."

"I was thinking of taking off a lot more than that," she purred. He stared at her in shock. "Well, why not? It's too hot for all these clothes, there's nobody here to see me but you, and... it might be fun."

"Uhh, uhh, that 'nobody else here' part might not be true!" he stammered, beginning to go red in the face. "I mean, the others are bound to come looking for us, and if they find you, without your... uhh... what would they think?"

"The guys would think you're a real man at last," she grinned, "and Astrid will get over it."

"_Get over it?!_" he burst out. "You make it sound like... eating with the wrong fork or something! She'd skin us alive!"

She chuckled lightly. "Hiccup, for a smart boy, you just don't get it! We Vikings have rules about these things, but nobody follows them, except you and maybe Astrid. Every Viking man has his girlfriends, and most Viking women have their boyfriends, whether they're married or not. Everybody knows it happens, and as long as you don't get too obvious about it, nobody says anything, because everybody else is doing it too."

"Everybody except me. Ruff, I want to say this once," he exclaimed. "Maybe I'm the last Viking in the Nine Worlds who really follows the rules, but they're important to me. I'm asking you nicely â€" please don't push me to break those rules. It isn't anything personal; I'd push Astrid away too, if she was saying what you're saying."

"Nothing personal?" She looked doubtful. "You really don't think I'm ugly?"

"Well... if I thought that, then the idea of you taking stuff off wouldn't bother me so much."

"Huh. I guess that's true." She thought about that for a while as they walked.

They didn't find any pools, but they found a fat lungfish, over four feet long, that was also looking for deeper water. It took both of them to wrestle it out of the stream. The lungfish was too big for Toothless to swallow whole, so they cut it up with a sharp stone that Hiccup found, cooked a few of the less fatty pieces on a fire that Ruff made and Toothless lit, and ate them. They weren't very tasty; Ruffnut decided she liked the fish-wrestling better than the lunch. The rest of the pieces went down the dragon's gullet, one at a time.

"_Did you like the lungfish, bud?_"

"**Yes, it was savory and provocative, with a slightly smoky bouquet, layers of cherry and seasoned mutton, and an aftertaste reminiscent of avocado with a touch of oregano.**"

"_Seriously, bud?_"

"**Actually, it was a bad version of a normal fish, but I don't want to say what kind.**"

"_Why not? Just say it._"

"**All right. It tasted like... a horrendous haddock.**"

"_Ouch. Well, you did warn me._"

That was all the food they found all day. They were hungry again when they retraced their steps back to their cave. But Toothless thought he might be able to fly the next day, so they endured their discomfort and settled down for the night.

"You're going to behave tonight, right, Ruff?"

"If I have to," she sighed.

"Clothes on, hands off?"

"You're no fun at all!"

"You seemed to think wrestling a fish with me was fun, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, but that's not much. Do we have anything in common? Anything that matters?"

"A lot," he answered. "People think you're one of the idiot twins, and they don't expect much from you. They called me Hiccup the Useless, and they didn't expect much from me, either. I've been walking in your shoes for years, and you've been walking in mine, and we never knew it."

"How come?"

"Because we never had the chance to talk. That's the down side of you always having your twin brother around. It's hard to get to know you, because nobody can have a one-on-one conversation with you."

"So if I train my own Night Fury, things will get better for me?"

"Maybe not a Night Fury," Hiccup said, "but you need to find somebody who believes in you. Somebody who lets you be yourself, and accepts you for who you are, but who nudges you to try and become something better."

After a long pause, Ruff asked, "You mean, someone like you?"

"Ruff... I'm Hiccup! I'm not tall or handsome or muscular, I'm not crazy or adventurous or any of the things you like! What did I do to get you so obsessed with me?"

"You were nice to me. I'm not used to that. It kind of... touched me somehow."

"Nobody else has ever been nice to you before?"

"My brother is, sometimes, as long as nobody else is looking. Snotlout is really nice, whenever he wants a date or something. Fishlegs is nice because he's scared of me, I think. Astrid's a friend, but I feel like she's losing patience with me, now that she's chasing you instead. My parents... I don't want to talk about them."

After a few minutes, she said, "Hiccup... I'm cold again."

He sighed. "Fine. Same rules as last night." She cuddled up against him immediately.

"Hiccup, when we get back home... are you still going to be this nice to me?"

"We aren't going to sleep together, but I'm definitely going to treat you better than I used to."

"I'm glad," she sighed. She was soon asleep, judging by her breathing. He lay awake, thinking about a lot of things.

She was cuter than he'd realized, or maybe she was just growing on him, and she was very determined. If Toothless couldn't get them out of this valley soon, it was just a matter of time before she wore him down and they did something he'd regret. His only alternative was to drive her away by being cruel, and he just couldn't do that.

What if she did wear him down, and they did something they shouldn't? Astrid would dump him for sure. Could he find happiness in Ruff's arms instead? She wasn't his type, but then, Astrid wasn't perfect either, aside from her beauty. Astrid liked to hit him, to let him know who was in control. Ruff might hit him just for the fun of it, and she might want him to hit her back. He was sure he could never do that. He wasn't at all sure they could get along, long-term.

Ruff seemed to like him a lot, all of a sudden. How could he get her affections off of him without being cruel or hurting her emotionally? He had certainly misjudged her, and he hadn't lied when he said he'd treat her better once they got home. But if she was still putting moves on him when they got home, somebody was going to feel the weight of Astrid's temper. He didn't want that for himself, and he honestly didn't want it for Ruff, either.

When those terror-soars dove on him and his friends, had they hurt any of the others? He expected that they'd be searching for him by now. But if they or their dragons were downed and hurt, they might not be able to look for him. If he got above the fog and found no one, he might have to go hunting for them. He hoped they'd stuck together, one way or another. This was a big valley to have to search at low altitude.

Once he found Astrid again, and she asked him what he'd been doing while he was separated from the group, what would he tell her? If he tried to be evasive, she'd know in a heartbeat. If he outright lied, and she learned the truth, she'd be furious. If he told her the truth... he really didn't know what she'd do, but he doubted that he'd like her response. If he told her one thing and Ruff told her something different, who would she believe, and what would she do to the one she thought was lying? Oh, Astrid, sometimes you make things so difficult!

Ruff's hair really was awesome.

This mission to find a dragon's nest had become horribly complicated, for reasons that had little or nothing to do with dragons.

8. Chapter 8

****Do You Mind?**** Chapter 8

A/N Fun fact: this story started as three completely separate story ideas – the dragon mind-reading story, the lost-world story, and the Ruffcup tale. None of them were going anywhere in my mind, even

though I thought they were all good ideas. On a whim, I merged them all together, and... well, you know what happens when you put more than one plotbunny together. They make lots of little plotbunnies. This story is the result._

o

"**Fishlegs? Are you ready to get off this rock now?**"

"_Am I ready? I've been ready since yesterday, Meatlug! You set a new record for napping when there were important things to do!_"

"**What could be more important than getting enough rest?**" Meatlug stretched and yawned. "**Anyway, I'm getting hungry, so we might as well fly down and find something we can eat. Can you think of any reason why I might have a stiff neck?**"

"_You mean, __aside__ from the fact that you fell asleep in the sky and fell straight down until we wiped out on this cliff, head-first?_"

"**Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that to you. No wonder you were grouchy yesterday. Are you all right?**"

"_Yes, aside from a stiff neck, and an empty belly, and sore muscles everywhere from sleeping on solid rock, I'm fine._"

"**I've been sleeping on solid rock all my life, and my joints don't hurt. You just need more practice.**"

"_Meatlug, my big boulder-class beauty, I don't want to argue with you, but I'm not a dragon and I can't do what dragons do. I can't sleep on rocks, I can't nap all day, and it makes me very grouchy to go a day without food. Can we please fly down to the ground where I belong?_"

"**Seeing how that's where the food is, I guess so.**" Fishlegs climbed onto Meatlug, who lifted off easily, and they descended the sloping face of the rocky spire until they came out of the fog layer and could see again.

Near the base of the spire, they found the bundle that Meatlug had been carrying. The food had been ransacked by small animals, judging by the footprints, but the tent and sleeping gear were still in good shape. Fishlegs wanted to tie it back onto his dragon, but the ropes were broken in multiple places, so he made a mental note to come back to this spire when night was approaching.

They spiraled outward for most of the day, looking for something that looked appetizing to either of them, without success. They saw some strange creatures in a swamp; they were about seven feet long and looked something like the "crocodiles" Fishlegs had seen in a book, but their tails were too short, and their skin looked too soft. They didn't see any signs of the other members of the group, either.

Still, Fishlegs found a quiet pleasure in spending the whole day with his dragon, without distractions. When Meatlug wanted to take a midday nap, they landed on a hilltop covered in ferns, and Fishlegs leaned back against his slumbering dragon and took a nap himself. It

wasn't hard, seeing how he hadn't gotten much rest on the cliff all night.

"**I knew you could do it,**" was the thought that awakened him. He'd slept half the day away! "**I woke up half an hour ago, but I hated to disturb you. You looked so peaceful.**"

"_We need to get back to that spire so I can set up my tent._"

"**We'll get there,**" Meatlug thought back. They took a direct route, and got back to the spire minutes before the sunlight vanished. Fishlegs did most of the work of setting up the tent in the dark, lit only by the glow from the fireballs that Meatlug shot into the ground every minute or so.

"_Now I can sleep comfortably._" At least he hoped so; he was very hungry.

"**Now you're getting the right attitude.**"

The Gronckle lay sprawled in front of her boy's tent. They both slept very soundly that night.

o

When Astrid and the boys awoke, Hookfang and Barf and Belch were happily fishing in the lake. Stormfly was standing by the shore, shaking her head and looking cross.

"**Astrid, could you ask those boys to tell their dragons to settle down? They're making so many waves and ripples, I can't see my reflection in the water!**"

"_You ought to eat now, Stormfly. When all of you are done, the lake will be still, and you can see your reflection then._"

"**But what if something makes me dirty between now and then?**"

"_Do you mean the way the salt crusts on your scales after you swim in the ocean? This is fresh water; there's nothing here that will make you dirty. Going fishing will just make you cleaner._"

"**Oh, goody! Fishies, here I come!**" Stormfly leaped into the air and was soon busily stuffing her gullet with the fish she caught. Astrid shook her head and smiled at the same time, and joined the boys for a quick breakfast from the food they'd brought.

"Okay, here's the plan," she began. "First, I'm going to pop up above the clouds and see if Toothless or Meatlug is up there waiting for us. If not, we're going to do what we did yesterday, but we'll go further because we've got all day to do it. Does anybody have any other ideas we might try?"

"How about if we all yell, 'Hiccup, where are you?' real loud?" Tuffnut asked.

"Even if it worked, that won't help us find Fishlegs," Astrid replied. "We kind of have to do it the hard way."

She and Stormfly spiraled upwards again. They returned about five minutes later. "Nobody's up there," she reported.

"So much for an easy answer," Lout commented. "That means we have to keep searching this place, right?"

"I think we've got a feel for this place now, so we'll cover a lot more ground if we split up," Astrid said.

"Fine with me," Snotlout agreed.

"Uhhâ€¦ I'm still not sure about that," Tuffnut replied.

"What's the matter?" Lout taunted him. "You almost sound afraid of something!"

"I'm not afraid!" Tuff snapped back. "I'm justâ€¦ nervous."

"Nervous, afraid, same thing," Snotlout grinned. "You sound just like your sister!"

"Seeing how they're twins, that shouldn't surprise anybody," Astrid cut in. "Tuff, you can fly a pattern with me if it makes you feel better." He nodded gratefully. "Okay, Lout, you and Hookfang fly north until you find the valley wall, then go west until the valley ends, then come back here. We'll go south and west, and we'll all meet back here around lunch time. Stay high so those land-dragons can't get you."

"Which way is west?"

"Turn left just before you crash into the rocks," she snapped. Snotlout nodded and waved as his dragon peeled off to the north.

The Nadder and the Zippleback winged southward. After a few minutes, Astrid called, "We'll have a better chance of finding our friends if we spread out a little bit more."

"Okay," Tuff said. "I justâ€¦ wanted to thank you. For sticking up for me back there."

"Not a problem," she nodded. "Are you doing okay?"

After a moment, he answered, "I miss my sister."

"I'm sure you do," she nodded. "I miss all our friends."

"Ruff isn't just another friend!" he burst out. "She'sâ€¦ kind of my other half. We do everything together, even though we drive each other nuts sometimes. Together, we're awesome. Separate, we're just the idiot twins. It's been years since we were apart from each other this long."

"That really must be rough on you," she replied. He gave her a funny look. "No pun intended. I'm sure she's fine."

"I'm not so sure," he said. "I'm taking this harder than I thought I would. We're just soâ€¦ so used to each other! I feel like like

half my brain is missing. She might be feeling the same way, and that's not good."

"I can't say I know how that feels," she replied. "The closest connection I have is to my dragon, and I know that's not the same thing."

"Ruff reminds me of a dragon sometimes, but I'd still rather be with her than without her," Tuff admitted.

"Does she know you feel that way?"

"I guess so," he said reluctantly.

"You never talked to her about it?"

"Guys don't talk about stuff like that," he said dismissively. "Besides, she probably knows it anyway."

"Tuff, this whole thing with the dragons reading our minds has been strange, with some good moments and some bad ones. One thing it's reminded me of is that people can't read each other's minds. I used to wish we could, but with the troubles I've had with Stormfly lately, now I think it's good that we can't. That means we have to talk to each other about the things that matter. What if both of you spent your whole lives never telling each other how you really felt?"

"Don't girls just know that stuff somehow?"

"We're good guessers sometimes, mostly because you guys can be so obvious," she smiled. "But nobody is a mind reader. Even girls tell each other what really matters, just so we're sure."

"Huh." Tuff looked thoughtful, which was an unusual expression for him. "Maybe I'll say something to her after this whole mess is over. When nobody else is watching."

"I think that would be good," she nodded. "By the way, thank you for being willing to talk about this with me."

"You're safe," he replied. "I know you won't talk about it with anybody. Except Ruff." After a few seconds, he added, "How are you doing? Are you worried about Hiccup?"

She took a deep breath and decided to give him a straight answer. "I'm not worried about _him,_ exactly. As long as Toothless is with him, he's safe, wherever he is. It's him and Ruff _together_ that I worry about."

"She knows Hiccup belongs to you. I wouldn't worry."

"When people get under stress, or if they're in danger, it pushes them together," she said. "If she's nervous about being apart from you, that's stress for her. If Toothless is hurt, that's stress for him. Throw in one or two of those land-dragons for the danger, and those two couldâ€¦ I don't want to think about it."

"You really think he'd do you wrong?"

"I know a girl can turn his head if she wants to; Heather proved that," she said sadly. "I know he wouldn't start anything. That's why I keep asking about Ruff. I'm not saying she's bad or anything; I justâ€¦ I need you to tell me something hopeful."

"Can I lie?"

"No," she said flatly.

"Let me think about it," he said. Barf and Belch slid further away from her, widening their search path and making it impossible to talk to each other.

Now and then, one of them would see something that might be a sign of one of their friends, whistle and point at it, and they would spiral down to look at it. It always turned out to be an odd-shaped rock, or a set of footprints from one of the local creatures, or (in one case) a large turtle. There was no sign of any of their friends. They flew until they could see the rock walls of the valley, turned to the west, and continued until they reached the valley's western end. A small river flowed out between two tall rocks; it sounded like it became a tall waterfall on the other side.

As they turned back toward their camp, they saw Hookfang approaching. "Good timing," Astrid called as Snotlout came closer.

"Did you two have a nice little flight together?" he leered at them. "Boy and girl alone together for hoursâ€¦ who knows what happened? Maybe I should tell Hiccup about this."

"Shut up," Tuff and Astrid said in unison.

"Ooh, now they're even reading each other's minds, just like dragons!" Lout grinned. "Hiccup should be worried, right? Maybe, when we find him, I'll tell him all about..."

His voice trailed off as Barf breathed a green cloud at him. Hookfang veered away sharply before Belch could spark it.

They flew home in silence.

Once they landed, the dragons plunged into the lake, leaving the teens to light their own fire to bake their lunches. "Did you find anything?" Astrid asked Snotlout as the damp firewood snapped and sparked.

"Just a huge land-dragon with a neck as long as its tail," he answered. "It was wading in the swamp and ignored me."

"That means they aren't in this end of the valley," she decided. "I figure we've searched about a quarter of it so far. We'll go as far east as we can in the afternoon, and if we still haven't found them, we'll need to move our camp tomorrow morning." They nodded in agreement.

Their afternoon search was just as fruitless as their morning's work. It might have been fruitful; Snotlout flew within a hundred yards of Meatlug and Fishlegs as they snoozed on their hilltop, but didn't notice them. Lout was bored and a bit sleepy, and thought the Gronckle was an odd-shaped rock. Hookfang was distracted by three of

the terror-soars that were circling nearby, and didn't notice Meatlug at all. They saw no sign of Toothless, Hiccup, or Ruffnut.

After their supper, while Snotlout was trying to encourage Hookfang to get out of the water, Tuff pulled Astrid aside. "The most hopeful thing I can tell you about Ruff is that, if things were normal, she'd never lay a finger on Hiccup."

"Things aren't normal, are they?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not even close."

They all slept by the lake again. Snotlout slept easily, Astrid not so well, and Tuffnut tossed and turned for hours.

9. Chapter 9

****Do You Mind?**** Chapter 9

Hiccup woke up slowly the next morning. Spending the night in a rocky cave, sharing the space with a girl who might still have designs on him, didn't make it easy to get a relaxing night's sleep. She got up first, and left the cave to freshen up; he rolled aside to let her by, then tried to go back to sleep. Normally, Toothless would wake him up with loud, stompy demands to be ridden, but the cave had no roof for him to jump on.

"_Do you think you're ready to fly today, bud?_"

There was a short delay; Toothless was probably stretching his wing to see how it felt.

****I think I can fly, but I'd rather be certain if I'm carrying two of you. Can we wait until the afternoon?****

"_Sure. This must be the first time I wanted to fly more than you did._"

****Don't get used to it. Flying is life.****

Suddenly he heard Ruff scream. A moment later, he heard a nasty-sounding snarl from the same direction.

"_What's happening out there, bud?_" he asked as he stumbled to his feet.

****Too many trees â€" I can't see her.****

He scrambled out of the cave and ran in the direction he thought her voice came from. In about ten seconds, he found her.

She was standing with her back against a large tree, pinned there by the head of a huge land-dragon. This was no plant-eater. It reminded him forcefully of the Red Death, although it was about the size of a Deadly Nadder. It was sniffing her, probably deciding whether or not she was good to eat.

"Hiccupâ€¦ help!" she gasped.

"Chin-rub, Ruff! Rub his chin!" he suggested desperately.

She reached out and rubbed under the huge head. The creature's expression changed; the sniffing stopped.

"It's not working!" she exclaimed, "I'm doing it right, but it's just being happy! It isn't going down!"

"_Bud, get your fire ready. This might be a relative of yours, but it's him or us._"

Out loud, he said, "Rub him a little more, then break away and run past me, back toward the cave! Toothless will cover us!"

She froze. "Hiccupâ€¦ I can'tâ€¦"

"On three, Ruff, before that thing changes its mind! Oneâ€¦ twoâ€¦ _three!_"

She forced herself to sidestep out from between the huge head and the tree, turned, and ran for her life. Hiccup followed right behind her, hoping his metal foot wouldn't slip, zigzagging as he ran so the monster couldn't grab him easily. After a couple of seconds, he heard the creature snap out of its daze and start chasing them. He could hear its heavy footsteps pounding after them, getting closer; he didn't dare look to see how close.

As they burst out of the trees, he heard Toothless launch a firebolt, and the ground blew up under the big land-dragon's feet. It fell hard. When it got back to its feet, Hiccup and Ruff were cowering behind the angry Night Fury that was snarling and pawing the ground. The land-dragon decided this meal wasn't worth fighting for, shook its head, and stomped back into the woods.

"_Thanks, bud. That was exactly what we needed._"

"**You're welcome. I hate shooting at relatives, but every family has a crazy old uncle who needs a little pushback now and then.**"

Hiccup turned his attention to Ruff. She looked all right, except for a couple of scratches on her arms from running through the woods, but she was pale, breathing hard, and visibly shaking. He rested a hand on her shoulder â€" and instantly she was clinging to him for dear life.

"It's okay," he whispered. "It's gone now. You're safe."

She didn't answer; she just held him tighter than he'd ever been held before. He could feel her heart pounding in her chest, feel her trembling, feel every hyperventilated breath she took. He just held her until she began to settle down. It took a while.

"I have never... been so scaredâ€¦ in all my life," she finally gasped, "...and don't you dare... tell anyone I said that! Thank you... for helping me out of there."

"That's what friends do for each other," he said quietly. "I promised I'd try to be lucky for you, remember?"

"Yeah," she whispered. Her breathing slowly returned to normal. She pulled away for a second, gazed at him and impulsively leaned in to kiss him. It was just his bad luck that his resolve faltered at the same time hers did.

She didn't try to dominate him with her kiss, like Astrid usually did. It felt like she was trying to draw strength from him. He wasn't used to feeling stronger than somebody else. He resisted for half a moment, then wrapped his arms around her slender waist and gave in to the feeling. That feeling lasted a lot longer than he was used to.

He caught a stray thought from outside his mind "Well, it's about time, you two. Now get a room."

At last she let him go. She blinked in surprise and pulled away, embarrassed. "Sorry. You kept your promise to me; I guess I broke my promise to you. The one about behaving myself. You must hate me now."

"Ruff!" It took him a second to get his thoughts together, his head was still scrambled by the leftover feelings from the kiss. "I don't hate you. Maybe I'd be mad if this was a normal situation, but this isn't normal. We can't do this again, though. _Ever_. Okay?"

"Deal," she said, without enthusiasm. She spat in her hand; he was getting used to that, and shook her hand willingly. She continued to hold his hand when the handshake was done.

"Uhh, Ruff?" he asked. She let go reluctantly.

"Where can I find another awesome guy like you?" she asked sadly.

"Did you think I was so awesome a couple of days ago?" he wondered.

"No, not really," she admitted. "What we're going through together it's kind of opened my eyes."

"Awesome guys are all around you," he said. "You just have to learn how to look for them. We don't all have big muscles and rugged, handsome faces. Some of us are totally average, until the right situation lets you see what we're really like."

"I never thought of that," she nodded, and considered the idea in silence for a minute.

"Can you tell me one thing?" she asked, almost shyly. "Did you like it?"

"I probably shouldn't answer that," he said, and paused. "Yeah. It was nice."

"Just nice?" She sounded hurt.

"Nice, awesome, terrific, mind-blowingly intense if there was no Astrid, you could rope me in easily with a couple more like that. But like I said, we _can't_ do it again."

She nodded, but she seemed to be trying to hide a smile.

"I need to freshen up," he continued, "and then we'll try again to find something for us to eat." Then he went rigid for a moment. "Toothless says something is coming."

"What kind of something?" she asked, panic rising in her voice.

Toothless looked upward, searching the bottom of the cloud layer for something. Then he launched a plasma bolt straight into the sky; it burst brilliantly at the bottom of the cloud layer. When Hiccup thought his eyes had adjusted from the brightness, he looked up and saw spots. Three of them, with wings, closing in on them fast. Ruff was jumping up and down, waving her arms and woo-hoo'ing at the top of her lungs.

Their friends all landed at once, and the five of them quickly had their own mob scene. Ruff blew right past Snotlout and threw her arms around her brother, who hugged her back hesitantly, while Hiccup gathered Astrid up in his arms and held her a lot tighter than she was used to.

"Does this mean you missed me?" she asked, slightly amused.

"You have no idea," he whispered.

Meanwhile, Ruff had grabbed her brother's shoulders. "Don't ever leave me alone that long again!" she half-demanded, half-sobbed. "Ever!"

He astonished her by resting his hands on her shoulders and saying, "I really missed you too, Ruff."

"Really?"

"Really."

They hugged again. Hiccup still hadn't let Astrid go. Snotlout was standing by himself, trying to figure out what he ought to be doing.

Suddenly, they heard another voice. "There they are!" Meatlug buzzed into their clearing and landed roughly, almost spilling Fishlegs off her back. He dismounted and hugged the only person he saw who wasn't already hugging somebody.

"Okay, Legs, that's good, that's good," Lout protested.

"We were looking for food when we saw Toothless' plasma blast," he explained. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you guys!"

"Yeah, yeah, the feeling is mutual," Snotlout muttered. "Now either let go of me, or give back your man-card."

It took them a few minutes to sort themselves out and determine that everyone was healthy. Astrid, Snotlout, and Tuffnut shared their food with the other three, who hadn't eaten in a day (two days, in Fishlegs' case). Then they took wing, located the swamp so there

would be no trees or spires to catch them in the fog, and rose up out of the valley. They were going home.

Hiccup glanced at Ruff, happily back on her own dragon's neck, then looked away firmly.

"**You missed your chance, my friend.**"

"_Some chances aren't worth taking, bud. The price is too high._"

10. Chapter 10

Do You Mind? Chapter 10

As they flew home, they updated each other on what they'd been doing. (Hiccup and Ruff left a few of the more interesting details out of their narrative.) They all agreed that this valley might be fun to explore, but it wasn't really a dragons' nest, so they probably would not return.

"_What do you think, bud? Would you ever want to come back and say 'hello' to your distant relatives?_"

He got no answer.

"_Bud? Can you hear me?_"

"Guys?" Fishlegs called. "Meatlug isn't talking to me in my head anymore! Was it something I said?"

"Everybody, try thinking to your dragons," Hiccup called. They all tried it. Nothing happened.

"Whatever it was, I guess it finally wore off," he said, a bit sadly.

"I'm kind of glad, and also sad at the same time," Astrid admitted. "Stormfly wasn't the most interesting person to talk to, but it was nice for each of us to know what the other one was thinking. And she told me some rather interesting secrets."

"Good riddance to it!" Snotlout blustered. "I don't think Hookfang ever told me anything I didn't already know." Hookfang shook his head and neck, giving Lout a bone-rattling ride for a few seconds.

"It got confusing, with all four of us thinking at once," Tuff said, "but it came in handy sometimes. I guess I'll miss it."

"I'll write this up in the 'history' section of the Book of Dragons," Fishlegs decided. "It was one of those things that just happened, and we'll never know the reason why."

Hiccup rested a hand on Toothless' head; the dragon turned to look at him curiously. "Bud, it was neat to hear what you're thinking. I know you didn't like it so much, but I'll miss being able to have a conversation with you." Toothless snorted and shook his head quickly, and returned to the business of flying.

When they landed, it was nearly suppertime. They checked in with the chief, enjoyed a good meal in a comfortable place, went to bed early, and slept late the next morning.

In the afternoon, Hiccup passed Ruffnut as they made their way around the town. "Hiccup, have you got a second?"

"Sure," he nodded. They stepped aside between two tradesmen's buildings.

"All those things you said to me," she began. "All the nice things. Did you really mean them?"

"Every word," he nodded. "Especially the parts about how you've got more going for you than I ever realized. I think maybe we can be friends now. Real friends."

"But that's all?" she asked.

"That's all," he nodded. "We will never breathe a word aboutâ€¦ that other stuffâ€¦ to anybody. It happened, and it had its moments, and maybe we can learn something from it, butâ€¦ it's done. Deal?"

"Deal," she nodded. He spat in his hand and held it out. She grinned and shook it firmly, then let go without being prompted.

Later that evening, Ruff caught up with Fishlegs. "Do you mind if I ask you something?" she said.

"I guess not," he answered, puzzled.

"Are you scared of me?"

"N-no," he answered hesitantly. "Some of the things you do, those scare me, but you? No."

"Good," she said, grabbing his hand. "Let's go down to the cliffs, you and me, and look at the stars."

He froze, almost in a panic. "B-b-butâ€¦ it's too cloudy! Yeah, too cloudy! We can't see any stars!"

"Fishlegs, it's not about the stars! It's about you and me." She gave his hand a tug.

"I thought your brother said I wasn't good enough for you!"

"Just for once, my brother isn't here," she growled. "You are, and I am. Are you coming or not?" She pulled his hand again, and he followed. He wasn't sure if this was the start of something good, or if he was being led like a lamb to the slaughter, but it might be worth finding out.

At around the same time, Astrid found Hiccup as he was putting Toothless' flying gear away for the night. "Do you mind if I ask you something?" she said.

"I guess not," he answered nervously.

"When you were in that valley, did you ever take your vest off?"

"Uhhâ€¦ where are we going with this?" he stammered.

"I just need to know â€" did you take your vest off?"

"No, I didn't," he said slowly. "I almost did, because it was so warm there, butâ€¦ I got distracted by something and I never took it off."

"That makes me feel better," she said with a smile that might have been dangerous. "I'm glad it, and everything else underneath it, stayed on. You see, I happened to notice some very long blonde hairs on that vest."

"Oh, those!" he said, forcing an innocent-sounding chuckle. "That must have happened while I was braiding Ruff's hair for her." _I'm going to get hit,_ he thought.

"That could be," she nodded, "except her hair wasn't braided when we found you."

"Ohâ€¦ well, thenâ€¦ in that caseâ€¦ it must have happened when, ummm... ummm..." _I'm __really__ going to get hit_.

She leaned toward him, looking very serious. "Being lost in that valley with a hurt dragon was intense, wasn't it? Nerve-wracking, scary, stressful?" He nodded. "Sometimes people do things when they're stressed that they wouldn't do normally. Right?"

_Oh, gods! She __knows__!_ "Yeah. Sometimes," he quavered. Toothless watched them curiously.

She grabbed his shirt and glared at him. "Do you _ever_ want to go back there?"

Sometimes she told him things with messages hidden behind the words, and he didn't understand what she was trying to tell him. This time, he actually understood the hidden message. "No!" he exclaimed, vigorously shaking his head. "I don't _ever_ want to go there again!"

"Good," she smiled, and relaxed. Then she belted him in the arm, hard. "_That's_ for what you've been thinking when you watch me from behind!" Then she hit him again, but this one was only a half-hearted backhand swat. "And _that's_ for everything else that may or may not have happened back in the valley," she said. "On second thought, maybe that last one wasn't all your fault, so I guess I should make it up to you." She grabbed his shirt again, more gently this time, and pulled him close.

He didn't even try to resist _her_ kiss. Far from it! But just before she pulled away, he could have sworn he heard a distant thought, like an echo tickling the edges of his mind.

"**Well, it's about time, you two. Now get a room.**"

THE END

End
file.